LIGHTING+SOUND International

EAST 17 AT THE BRIGHTON CENTRE

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PLASA

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PHOENIX RISES

Rob Halliday charts the rise and fall and rise of the Lyceum Theatre

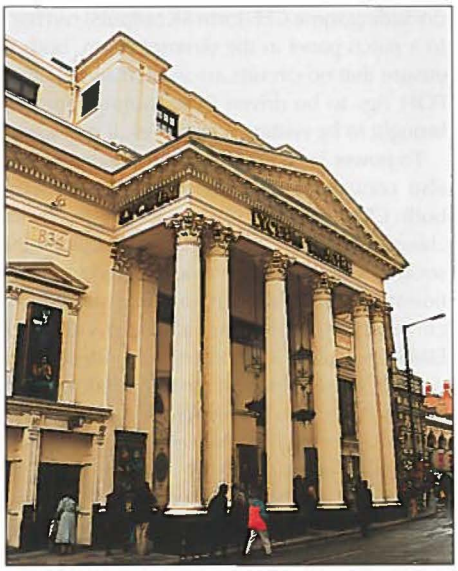
It's been horrible for theatre enthusiasts passing it by: the long, lingering death of the Lyceum Theatre, its splendid portico standing as a reminder of the slowly decaying auditorium inside. The lucky few who'd worked in there - the crew of the National Theatre's 1986 *Mystery* cycle, and the teams responsible for a couple of special events staged by Imagination - spoke regretfully of the mess inside, sad that nothing was being done to save the theatre. Especially since, from a purely commercial standpoint, it held enough people to make it a viable house for large-scale musicals, a size of theatre that London is acutely short of.

Above, the auditorium fully restored to its former glory and below, the imposing portico main entrance.

And that's leaving aside the history of the place. The first building opened in 1772, just a few hundred yards from the site of the present theatre, as 'Exhibition Rooms with Paintings and Sculptures', gaining its theatrical credentials when the nearby Theatre Royal in Drury Lane burnt down and the Drury Lane company moved to the Lyceum. When the company left, the Lyceum retained its theatre licence, and was rebuilt to the designs of Samuel Beazley in 1815. In 1817 it earnt its place in stage lighting history by being the first theatre to have gas lighting over the stage as well as the auditorium. In 1830 it was destroyed by fire.

A replacement theatre, again designed by Beazley, opened just four years later. Part of that building remains to this day: the stunning portico that still marks the front of the theatre. In a curious precursor to the present day, where Apollo initially bought the Lyceum with the intention of offering it as a temporary home to the Royal Opera House, the second Lyceum played host to the opera company when Covent Garden burnt down in 1856. When that company returned home, the theatre was taken over by Hezekia Bateman as a showcase for his daughters. While they are now not generally remembered, their leading man changed the theatre's fortunes dramatically. He was Henry Irving and he first achieved acclaim when he persuaded Bateman to mount a production of *The Bells*, and played the lead for over 150 performances. He followed this with 180 nights as Charles I, and then in 1874 played a highly acclaimed Hamlet. Four years later he was running the theatre and, with his leading lady Ellen Terry, turned it into "the most brilliant playhouse in London".

Another fire, this time in the scenery store, destroyed almost all of Irving's assets and he sold control of the theatre. He continued to perform there until 1902 but, after he left, the controlling syndicate tried and failed to sell the theatre, and then, with the London County Council pressing for many costly improvements, decided to construct a new auditorium behind the existing portico. That auditorium, designed by Bertie Crewe (also responsible for the Phoenix, Piccadilly and Shaftesbury Theatres) is the one that remains



today. This incarnation of the theatre presented a mixture of popular drama, melodramas and pantomime until 1926, when Dame Sybil Thorndike as St. Joan brought greater variety to the programme.

In 1939, the Lyceum was purchased by the London County Council, who wanted to demolish it to make way for a new traffic scheme. The final production was *Hamlet* directed by and starring John Gielgud. "Long live the Lyceum," Gielgud cried as the curtain fell for the final time. And it did, for war intervened and the scheme was abandoned. Mecca Ballrooms took over the theatre, transferring their dance floor, constructed from old Morrison air-raid shelters, from its war-time home, the Opera House.

The Lyceum became a popular ballroom dancing venue and this was followed by a spell housing television, rock and pop events, including concerts by Bob Marley, U2, the Eurythmics and others. In 1985, the National brought drama back to the theatre, transferring their acclaimed *Mysteries* cycle across the river after the closure of the Cottesloe Theatre; performed in promenade, the show used Mecca's dancefloor as its stage.

That was the last public performance for over 10 years, as the theatre became enmeshed in legal disputes. Its freehold had been handed down to the Greater London Council in 1972, and when the GLC was abolished control passed to the London Residuary Body. They awarded the freehold to the Theatres Trust, but a 125 year lease was granted to Brent Walker. With internal problems of their own, Brent Walker chose to let the theatre die; at one point the Trust themselves had to take over the insurance of the building. It was only after prolonged negotiations that the Trust were able to reach agreement to transfer the lease to Apollo Leisure.

That transfer was completed in 1994, with Apollo intending to offer the theatre to the Royal Opera during the imminent closure of the Opera House. The company realised that the building needed considerable work, and a decision was taken that while the auditorium would be restored to its former glory, it would be more economical to start from scratch with the stagehouse. Everything from the proscenium arch back was thus demolished and built anew, resulting in a 1996 stage joined to a 1904 auditorium, joined to an 1834 portico, the latter repaired by Priest Restoration. At the same time, the company acquired sites along the side of the theatre, allowing it to plan for a new wing to hold dressing rooms as well as bars, hospitality suites and a restaurant, appropriately named Irving's, to help balance the books - Apollo is, after all, a commercial company. That did not stop them applying for lottery funding but the application was turned down - perhaps as a result of being the first from a commercial organisation.

The project management and theatre consultancy for the project was largely kept in-house, with Steve Lavelle, Apollo's property and development director overseeing the project and Adrian Leggett, the company's director of productions, providing technical advice. The architect for the project was John Murphy of Holohan Architects; he had already been dreaming about the Lyceum for several years before being brought in on the project.

Work on the £14.5million project began with meetings in January 1994, and proceeded right up to the opening night of the theatre's eventual tenant, *Jesus Christ Superstar* (see L+SI, January 1997), in November 1996 - and beyond, since the scaffolding at the rear of the building was still up a month after the opening, and odd builders and painters could still be found wandering around the building. The construction team cite the two most challenging parts of the project as being co-ordinating everyone working on the new fly tower so that everything could be contained within the tiny city-centre space available, and matching the new extension in Exeter Street with the original building.

The new wing to hold dressing rooms as well as bars, hospitality suites and a restaurant, appropriately named Irving's.

Inside, the auditorium is a thing of beauty. It is large, yet never appears so; visitors consistently guessed its capacity at 1000 seats or fewer; in fact it is up around the 2000 seat mark. Moving around the auditorium is, for the most part, easy, with wide aisles - though the upper circle is very steep! It compensates, though, by having unusual, high-backed seats which are very comfortable. There have been mixed opinions about the colour scheme, predominantly red, and about some of the fixtures and fittings and it is, in any case, quite hard to get an opinion of the auditorium as a whole at the moment because John Napier's set obscures the boxes and pros arch with their carefully restored mouldings and cherubs, and the spectacular ceiling paintings, and the rake of the stalls has been slightly altered to better suit the show's thrust stage. What can't be disputed is that it's in much, much, much better condition than two years ago, the construction team having cured damp, removed years of paint and grime, restored original features and even rebuilt complete boxes that were replaced with staircases in the ballroom days. Quibble about the colour if you like, but Apollo have undoubtedly saved a gorgeous theatre from ruin.

Technically, the building was pulled in several directions by differing demands. The need to impress the Royal Opera company imposed some early design decisions; when they pulled out, the theatre seemed likely to serve as the London house for Apollo's regional tours. Versatility and infrastructure thus became the names of the game. To provide the building blocks for this, Apollo have installed a new sub-station in the basement, to ensure that the building never runs short of power. They have also made provision for a scenery lift (since the dock door is at street level and stage level is about one floor below that) and an orchestra pit lift, though neither will now be installed until after *Superstar* finishes its run. The new fly tower was equipped with a conventional, 74-bar plus four side-bar single-purchase counterweight flying system by Unusual Rigging. Unusual's engineering division, led by Simon Tiernan, got the majority of the system installed in one hectic three-week burst during July, which saw two teams of six people working around the clock. The speed was possible because the entire system was prefabricated off site.

Responsibility for the lighting installation was assigned to Stage Electrics. Stage's Adrian Searle and Nick Ewins had long meetings with Adrian Leggett to pin down Apollo's requirements, and Ewins then designed the system which he and his team installed during September. The final system is based around Strand's LD90 dimmers, with 288 2.5K and 24 5K circuits feeding facilities panels around the building. All the front-of-house circuits (including some CEE-form 5K outputs) run back to a patch panel in the dimmer room, both to ensure that no circuits are wasted and to allow FOH rigs to be driven from touring dimmers brought in by visiting companies, if required.

To power such dimmers, the dimmer rooms also contains a large temporary supply with both CEE-form and Camlock outlets. Ewins chose to base the patch panel on 15A plugs and sockets and while this doesn't make for the tidiest of set-ups for long-running shows, it is certainly flexible. He also provided 24 DMX-controlled contactors for independent circuits, these based on custom modules built by Stage Electrics and installed in LD90 racks, as well as 24 ways of houselight dimming and 24 ways of worklight switching. The houselights can be controlled from the lighting desk, or they and the worklights can be set using the comprehensive state control panels provided on stage, at the Stage Electrics-built prompt desk and in the control room. Ewins also provided interconnections so that the standard dimmers driving houselights included as part of *Superstar*'s lighting rig would be forced on with the rest of the houselights in the event on an emergency.

Dimmer, worklight, independent, DMX and comms outlets are then scattered freely around the building. Front-of-house, facilities panels appear in the boxes on each side of the auditorium, sockets (including 5K outlets for TV users) run above the roof bar that runs above the upper circle, and DMX outlets also appear at each end of this bar. The upper circle front doesn't contain any lighting positions because of weight limitations, but the lower circle has a bar running its full width, and Socapex outlets are built into the circle front.

On stage, facilities panels appear all over the place at stage level, and on the two galleries at loading height above the stage - the intention is that tripes will be run up to this level, leaving the fly-floor levels free for fly people. Further facilities panels appear in the substage area and in voids above the auditorium, to feed the advance trusses that will inevitably appear. The installation also includes temporary mains CEE-form connectors down-stage left (these are currently diverted to feed *Superstar*'s extra sub-stage dimmers), as well as CEE-form patch connectors that run up to the auditorium roof to allow the chain hoists for those advance trusses to be powered easily and without messy dangling feed cables.

The system, for the moment, eschews high-tech lighting control; there is a socket labelled 'Ethernet' in the dimmer room, but the actual cable was cut on cost grounds. The DMX installation does not use any kind of DMX ring either - instead, it is a radial system where every outlet runs back to a patch panel in the dimmer room. Three DMX lines from the control room go into a splitter which gives five outputs of each line; these can then be plugged through to any outlet. Sadly, for *Superstar*, more ways were needed, so the house splitters were supplemented with XTBA smart splitters. Apart from that, however, the installation has already met the needs of one big, complex production, and should easily meet the demands of any touring show lucky enough to play the Lyceum in the future.

In its other technical aspects, the building still has its fair share of oddities and problems. The grid and all of the fly floors, for example, are floored with a metal mesh that is one of the most uncomfortable surfaces ever for kneeling on. Though the front-of-house dimmer outlets and patch are excellent, some of the rigging positions are less than ideal. Little had been done to secure the side booms or the roof lighting bar, for example, so they rotated as lamps were focused; a session with a welder has now cured that.

Of course, things could always be improved if more time was available, and at the end of the day enough was achieved for *Superstar* to open on time - it was actually amazing to watch order appear out of chaos. We can just hope that refinement of the installation continues now that some calm has settled on the site, and that time is allowed to complete it properly when *Superstar* finishes its run. In the meantime, the new name signs clearly tell the world the theatre is back in business, the restored foyer floor leads the audience into the welcoming auditorium, while the new annex ensures that they never have to wait for a bar or a toilet.

Yes, perhaps Apollo could have done better in some of the detailing of their restoration. That they have done the restoration at all while others just talked about it, and at their own expense, and got so much of it right is cause for celebration - and they even seem to have triggered off a general redevelopment of the Aldwych area, with new restaurants springing up everywhere and the building opposite the Lyceum currently being re-constructed as a hotel. John Gielgud, who spoke the closing words from the stage in 1939, sent a message to celebrate its reopening. It ended "When I bid a regretful farewell to the theatre in 1939 I feared the site would be vandalised and even, perhaps, forgotten, by future generations. May it now prosper in its new contents and resume its proper place as an important landmark in theatrical history".

Amen to that.